

On Unavenged Tears

Tell me yourself—I challenge you: let's assume that you were called upon to build the edifice of human destiny so that men would finally be happy and would find peace and tranquility. If you knew that, in order to attain this, you would have to torture just one single creature (...) and that on her unavenged tears you could build that edifice, would you agree to do it? Tell me and don't lie!

— Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 1880

Who would answer “yes,” to the above question? Who would respect anyone who answers affirmatively to this scenario? Who could live in a world who knows it was built upon these terms? Who would respect anyone who agrees to be a part of the wondrous destiny based upon those terms?

Attempts to answer these questions have been made everyday throughout all of history. For instance, Christianity doubtlessly has formed much of the basis of modern Western society. Dostoevsky further developed his story to discuss a major tenet of Christianity, the belief that the torturous death of Jesus of Nazareth created that perfect destiny for humans. For Christians, the sacrifice of the single being for the salvation of others happened when Christ Jesus died horribly and in a manner that would leave him cursed (according to how one reads the laws of *Deuteronomy*). Even those who do not believe in the divinity of Jesus often admit that his is the story of a person whose death did much to shape the destiny of the concrete world and the Heaven that may or may not exist. Dostoevsky’s work even predicted, in the chapter entitled “The Grand Inquisitor,” future persecutions of Christ Jesus that would be perpetuated in later ages for the purpose of the happiness of the masses.

The fact is that the individuals that form the masses, indeed, either have accepted the terms listed above or have been influenced by social mores evolving from this (rather myopic) tolerance. So, please seriously consider your answer to the question. If you still can say, with perfect honesty, “no, I

never could agree to do such a thing," then you have achieved some elusive singularity in the world about which most of the rest of us only wonder. Congratulations.

I was young when I read the above quote, and truthfully facing that question was like a loss of innocence for me. The idea that someone would sacrifice another person to build a better destiny was quite familiar to me. I knew that individuals died for selfish reasons in all places of the cosmos and at all times. I also knew that anyone, everyone even, always can dishonestly justify hurting someone else. Still, Dostoevsky's definite accusation of dishonesty about this issue, leveled against all individuals, struck me. Most of us tell ourselves that, if the victim is not an "innocent," then we have not committed any true harm against fellow man. Hence, we have not fulfilled the conditions of the scenario Dostoevsky described. Yet, though the author did discuss the tragedy of hurting certain "innocent" individuals (like abused children), Dostoevsky's question was not limited specifically to such blameless persons. The author wrote about the innocence of children as a means of highlighting the hypocrisy he found in humanity—how can those who allow a world in which innocent children suffer so horribly claim sympathy for the misery of their fellow sinful humans? And, how do those who cannot claim true sympathy for the suffering of their fellow men honestly answer Dostoevsky's question?

Hence, it was interesting for me to think how much "good people," I included, delude themselves into believing in their moral superiority to criminal people who deliberately decide that they can harm others to make supposedly better destinies. We are outraged by the fascist dictator who condemned average citizens to die because he did not see a place for them in the superior race nation he was trying to create. Where a religious group might find dissenters guilty of disrupting their sanctified community and too dangerous to live, we (the "good people") might see victims who are different, but

not evil. Yet, we allow a death sentence to be carried out on a murderer for the sake of a safe and more peaceful future for the victim's family and society. We send soldiers to kill "enemies" for political objectives that supposedly will help us maintain our cherished lifestyles. We live in a contradictory state; the concept of perceived innocence helps ease the discomfort.

What is "innocence?" No one has a clear definition. We do know that we think of the loss of innocence as a tragedy, a divorce from all that is good about life and existence. I have noticed that this belief is especially virulent in American society. This tendency might be a reflection of the fact that modern Americans, as a whole, are particularly young and fresh when compared to many cultures. The majority of Americans cringe and superficially disavow the attitude that has been conditioned into us from birth. However, self-awareness reveals that most of us see the USA as having been blessed with wealth, power, and benevolent disposition. Many Americans proceed, thinking that, while having known dark times, our soils have primarily avoided the horrors that curse other societies. Even those times of unrest have been characterized by honorable activity, and not the devastating compulsions of a few evil men who somehow wield power over multitudes. We understand our imperfections because our minor mistakes were made with admirable intentions. Meanwhile, our aggressive compassion and paternalistic duty lead us to fight the misdeeds that have led to the misfortunes others face. Evil may exist in the world, but we are here to correct its destructive results. And, the whole world wants to be America. What a wonder are we, definitely worth everyone we sacrificed along the way to making the USA! In fact, all references to genocide, slavery, class, segregation, women's studies, hegemony, isolationism, Latin American dictatorships, and disturbances in the Middle East are mocked as "political correctness" (which is unquestionably bad). We push "political correctness" out of our minds, dismiss unpleasantness (without fair hearing), and maintain the *weltanschauung* that has been ingrained in us. It is easiest that way.

We may still be stuck in the *mentalité* described by Edith Wharton in *The Age of Innocence* (1920). There are problems all around us and in our lives, but the privileged are fortunate enough to be able to choose to keep their optimism and zest for a good world. The luckiest members of society extinguish any appearance of life's messiness before their hearts can become troubled, thereby keeping their "innocence." I would argue even that our optimism is related closely to a youthful and *bourgeois* commitment to the idea that our lives always can be happier, more fun, more comfortable, better in whatever manner we choose. Americans may disagree among ourselves as to how betterment is to be accomplished, but we still optimistically, and sometimes hedonistically, believe that tangible happiness is absolutely possible. We tend to deal with evil by holding steadfastly to our optimistic view of the world, no matter the evidence against this position. The optimist perspective has been controversial on a global level for centuries. For example: while Gottfried Leibniz, a founder of calculus, might have found Americans interesting subjects for his theodicy studies (that is, logical proof of the existence of the divine through proposing justifications for God's allowance of evil and harmful events in his creation), Voltaire would be disappointed in American optimistic thinking. In his *Candide* (a 1759 novel written to satirize Leibniz' theodicy), Voltaire described his conclusion that individuals are made happy through enlightened reasoning and wisdom, gained from experience and rational reflection on reality.

It is not my intention to intimate that there is no place for such optimism in the world. Still, every generation has had a time of "loss of innocence," an interruption of optimism, made inevitable by the presence of destructiveness in a greater world. The American Baby Boomers (my parents generation) learned their lesson about evil when President Kennedy died, and through the Vietnam War. Their parents learned from their experiences of the Great Depression and World War II. The generation prior learned from World War I. Their parents learned about ugliness from Jim Crow. And the pain goes as far back as it can. Everyone coped with the darkness in his own way. Some people did all they could to rebel. Some accepted the world as it was. Many people simply tried to survive. My generation was

forced to learn about this reality the day after my twenty-fourth birthday (which happened to be September 10, 2001). In a solipsistic way, I knew that I would remember my twenty-fourth birthday as the last day of normalcy and innocence for Generations X and Y. I knew that people would grow afraid, terrified even, for a long time.

In the aftermath following any violent event, entangling through the minds of those who survive is the question of "Are we safe?" Immediately behind follows the question of how to protect ourselves in a dangerous world. But our perceptions of danger and our safety are illusory and false. Statistics from the World Health Organization show that an individual is more likely to die by suicide than as a result of violence inflicted upon him or her by others. Still, any victim of violent crimes knows that no matter the preparation, we are always vulnerable.

Really, have we ever been safe? Violence has been present and obvious always; humanity never has known real peace. Why? Humans squeezed fear, greed, and power into codependent and dysfunctional partners in a complex collaboration between realities. Fear, greed, and power are only concepts, neither good nor bad. Yet, somehow, humanity has allowed itself to believe that these ideas have more authority than they do. The odd collaboration which we make of these ideas, that I have observed, has filled us with repulsion for the certainty of imperfect existence. Therefore, every sip of heterogeneity and every taste of vulnerability become threats that must be not only expectorated, but destroyed without regard to the irrationality and immorality of the means. But, still, heterogeneity and vulnerability grow like hydras in spite of combat. Our fears are realized thus, and we become ever more petrified that, in spite of all our efforts, we are powerless against the reality we make. Our perception of impotence is somewhat true; we have, for instance, no power over others' choices. And, we have no

control over the past. History and distinct persons are analogous in that no separate individual can control another's living will. All we can control is how we respond to another individual's, or the past's, presence in our lives.

Regard, for a moment, the history of Western civilization, especially during and after the Renaissance, the age of the Reformation and the Wars of Religion, budding imperialism, and the setup for modern revolutions. Many Europeans of the fifteenth century became committed to humanist and Neoplatonic ideas regarding the dignity of humanity. I never have agreed that a "human nature," that dictates that there always will be violence in the world, exists. The only "human nature" in which I believe is potential. We are the only species of which we know endowed with the ability to choose what guides us. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola argued in his "Oration on the Dignity of Man" (1486), that humans share the status of *quis*, or individuality or someone-ness, with God alone. This means that we are not fixed in a nature, but can move on the Great Chain of Being envisioned by Plato. Humans can choose to sink to the level of beasts by embracing our baser instincts (like violent urges), or strive to rise to the level of angels by exercising higher faculties (by use of intellect). Pico's postulations on human status on the Great Chain of Being might be controversial according to modern standards. Nevertheless, especially when coupled with the Judeo-Christian tradition that explained man's existence as being made in the image and likeness of God, ideas like Pico's encouraged various early modern European cultures to explore the idea that humanity had some role in creating the world environments.

During the early modern era, Europeans explored and colonized the world that God had allotted them. Among the lands that they were to "discover" and claim for themselves were the Americas, which they dubbed the "New World." The name that Europeans gave to the Americas suggested that they viewed this land as virginal, ready for the building of new societies. Colonizers' desires to ultimately act as individuals endowed with special dignity and made in the image and likeness of God came to be reflected in their fantastic visions of the Americas. One of the most important parts of the colonizers'

social construction was the belief that humanity's base and violent tendencies had to be suppressed; ideas on how this goal should be accomplished included enforcing social order through the benevolent and paternalistic leadership of parental figures, missionaries, or government officials. Meanwhile, ideas that maintained that Non-European peoples, the peasantry, women, and children were naturally-ordained subordinates with respect to reason, who were incapable of propelling the community forward, and thereby needed European male guidance in order for society to advance, became ingrained into Western discourses on social improvement. For many Western social analysts, the prospect of allowing these "subordinates" any degree of self-determination was not compatible with the goal of constructing perfected worlds through social advancement. European plans for creating utopias were based in part upon violent subjugation of natural environments and upon destruction of the autonomy, and often welfare, of a variety of populations (including indigenous cultures, enslaved peoples, and even the white peasantry). The violence of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century rebellions, revolutions, and civil wars in the Western World demonstrated that attempts to create peacefully perfect societies on both sides of the Atlantic ultimately did not succeed; the violent and destructive natures of European utopian plans resulted in their failure.

Again, Western history reveals that humanity is, as a whole at least, willing to sacrifice others in order to pursue what they consider a perfect world, whether or not we admit to making this choice. This problem formed a cornerstone of the dissertation work that I pursued through the years following September 11, 2001. Without doubt, the lingering effects of that grisly day were in my mind. I wanted to know why such terrors happened, and I needed to know what to learn from them.

My dissertation work, somewhat inspired by disaster, forced me to acknowledge many truths about the historic record and about the human experience. I have always known that we, humans, that is, need to be extremely careful of the ideas we choose to allow to underwrite and manipulate the cultures that evolve around us. Working on my dissertation made me aware of the extreme importance of “thinking” as history has unfolded. Where, in fact, does “Contemporary History” begin for those living in the world of 2016? That is hard to say. Everything seems to blur into one huge, predestined whole when historians think in terms of causes and effects or beginnings and end results. Let us work backwards. From the Eurocentric standpoint (which, unfortunately, I have allowed to dominate the backdrop of this essay at the expense of other histories), we still feel the effects, one of which is terrorism, of mistakes made during the Cold War. The Cold War was caused in part by World War II. World War II was the child of the unresolved First World War, which was caused partly by nineteenth-century imperialism. Nineteenth-century imperialism grew from the marriage of industrialization and the *mentalités* that evolved from revolutions and early modern imperialism. Early modern imperialism was but one result, along with iconoclasm and wars of religion, of the Reformation. The Reformation came as a reaction against a corrupt and rigid Roman Catholic Church, which became ever more obvious when the printing press was invented. The printing press was the godfather of high technology, which made lives easier, but exacerbated the destructiveness of all developments throughout the rest of history. And so it goes on.

Meanwhile, throughout the progression of years and events, people change, and so do the sensations of eras. Earlier times do feel foreign, but connected, somehow. One could think in terms of overwhelming characteristics of an age: cultures differ not only by geography and faith, but by generations, centuries, and millennia as well. How does an era look or feel? What are the unique tastes, smells, and sounds of the times? I can guess safely that most present-day American teenagers do not listen to Johann Sebastian Bach’s music regularly. These same teenagers typically do not wear hoop

skirts, sack-back gowns, or bustles to school on a daily basis. How many of today's Americans would find themselves repulsed by the idea of eating, as a delicacy, pheasant and peacock brains, lamprey milt, pike liver, and flamingo tongue mixed into a dish (known as the "Shield of Minerva," enjoyed by the Roman emperor Vitellius)? Today's individuals are blessed to live in a world in which indoor plumbing is a common feature.

What are the sensations and *zeitgeists* of the age in which we live now? When I think of my own generation, images of diet soda pop, "Young Adult" sections in bookstores, vaccines, saggy pants, and music videos come to mind. I have seen the short life of grunge, the resurgence of bubblegum pop and boy and girl bands, and the realization (and subsequent commercialization) of rap and hip-hop. I can say that I lived through the ages of romanticized mental illness, when chemically-addicted and/or eating disorder-afflicted models in fashion magazines were the standard of beauty, when every "genius" was supposed to have suffered from unipolar or bipolar depression, and when Attention Deficit Disorder (with or without hyperactivity) excused obstreperous behavior. Mine was the era of the beginning of technological dependence, when upgrades were becoming banal entitlements that did not come with enough alacrity. I saw the times of the rise of Japanimation, the obsessive playing of video and role-playing games, and midnight release parties for a boy-wizard's saga. I lived among the first generation to which segregation was history. Prejudices still formed barriers between us. Yet, steps had been made so that we did not have to fear extremely our curiosity about, and occasional educational forays into, the other sides of boundaries made by genetic markers, geographic convenience, or environments beyond our control. I lived in an era of youthful higher education and a time when people could travel easily and cheaply to see the wonders of the world. I am seeing the end of those trends approach as new generations grow. I have seen much of the open-mindedness, expressiveness, rebellion, and sense of adventure shatter suddenly, and then die in slow and painful ways. I live in an age of violence and terrorism. These are the days during which a parade, a concert, a simple visit to a

restaurant, a ride on a train or a trip to the airport to begin an exciting vacation, could become dangerous in a moment. These are the days during which the same plane that opened young and old minds to the greater world could be used to kill scores of people. Thus, once again, the fear, the greed, and the irresponsible use of power take over our minds, justifying all means of making us feel more secure in an imperfect world.

The universe has survived through all changes, some positive evolutions and some ravaging forces, as the timeline stretches backwards into infinity. Hopefully, humanity will continue to thrive no matter what the future holds. We collectively have learned from the consequences of historic developments. For example: although genocide and slavery still exist because of corrupt individuals, humanity continues to learn through experience that the refusal to condemn and act against these atrocities is wrong. Still, we have much to learn.

Really, what sense can we make of things like war and violence without admitting that we, as a collective, are willing to harm others and justify our actions by refusing to think of the sacrificed person as victims because they fail to pass as “innocents?” But, should any human judge who is expendable and who is not? Who can say who deserves to die and who should live? Again, I will refer to the life of Jesus: there were plenty of people who thought him dangerous and wrong, and there were those who believed he was the sinless, sanctified son of God. Apparently, “innocence” and adulteration are not the absolute truths we believe them to be. Humanity has studied questions of “moral relativism” for millennia, without providing perfect answers. For example, twenty-first-century Americans say comfortably that our society is morally-upright. One reason for this assumption rests in the belief that those sinners who contaminate a desirable way of life are (sometimes) punished. Yet, does a terrorist

not often believe that all of his victims were horrendous sinners? Many terrorists believe that they do not victimize other people; rather, they believe that they fight sin to make the world a much better and holier place. Scores of terrorists still believe, as do we, that they should sacrifice other people for the good of the multitude. Thus we all make the world a dangerous place. So long as anyone is willing to sacrifice someone else in any way for his own ends, however altruistic they may seem, we will have a violent world.

Humanity obviously cannot determine, let alone agree upon, which person or persons are expendable and on which person or persons are not, or what constitutes a worthwhile destiny and what does not. This reason is enough to lead me to conclude that humanity never should allow anyone to be excluded from the “greater good” to be sacrificed for the sake of any destiny. Modern examples of the ancient question of “moral relativism” establish the veracity of this premise. Once, I learned for the first time about the murder of the Romanovs during the Bolshevik Revolution, and I thought that it seemed harsh to kill the royal family. I understand Bolshevik thinking, in spite of the fact that I cannot condone their actions; Nicolas and his heirs were constant threats, potential focal points of uprisings against the new government. Other nations, economic systems, and forms of government were considered threats to the world order the revolutionaries envisioned as well. Before we judge, however, we must remember that American government has decided to bring democracy to peoples of other nations for its own interests, without care as to whether or not those peoples were ready for or even wanted such a society. These actions and opinions are not different from those of the Soviets who decided that communism was the form of society that the world needed and who used force of arms to bring that sort of government to other nations. I know that few citizens want to admit that their government commits acts of tyranny; albeit, everyone must acknowledge that our governments (and we) are flawed and subject to good and evil impulses. With each unnatural death citizens excuse as part of a “noble” cause (such as securing social safety or spreading our ideas of the best political and economic systems

for world order), so strengthens the insidious precedent that allows the powerful to harm the weaker (who are still sanctified as persons, whether "good" or "bad").

Most, if not all, of the governments that have enormous capacity to commit violent acts against other states have taken pride that borders on pathological narcissism in their power. They disguise their pride by making a plethora of references to "national security." Yet, many early twenty-first-century Westerners are concerned, almost to the point of hysteria, about the prospects of the countries like North Korea and Iran having nuclear weapons, and they should be. But, the situation is not simple. The United States government is the only one to have ever used nuclear weapons against civilians of another country. I truly cannot understand how my government can dare say to the world, "We have weapons of mass destruction, but we do not allow you to do the same." Is the whole world simply supposed to trust the American government? I really would like to know why; what convincing reason has the American government given that entitles it to the submission and blind trust of the entire globe? Many people tend to dismiss the racist and vengeful motivations lurking beneath the deliberately belligerent decisions to use nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the danger unleashed by the potential consequences of these choices. Rather, most would prefer to accept the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki as tragedies, but decisions made by the "good guys" in order to end a war started by the "bad guys."

Of course, twenty-first-century Americans tend to believe that Westerners are the "good guys" of the world, so we do not become particularly nervous about the fact that the governments of our allies, like those of Great Britain and France, have used the building of weapons of mass destruction as symbols of national greatness. A friend of mine once told me that she knew that none of the Western countries or Israel would launch a nuclear weapon against anyone. I asked her how she "knew" that. She responded by telling me that, although lacking any reason for her faith, she simply accepted her decision to "know" that the Westerners and Israel would never commit such an act. Another friend of mine once

told me that his elite Catholic school history class once discussed the question of whether or not the United States ever could become a nation like Nazi Germany. Of course, the class answered that it is a foolish notion that "anything like that" could happen in America. Again, the typical American perspective, that our nation is somehow magically benevolent, became obvious. My friend, however, conceded the fact that we cannot know what will happen given various circumstances/contexts, and given the right context, another leader like Adolf Hitler could arise in the United States.

Acknowledging this reality, I surmise that we really cannot be certain that our leaders will not use nuclear weapons to hurt someone else. In fact, the United States government has shown the world numerous times that it is willing to attack other nations and leave their civilians to suffer for it without thoroughly thinking through this dire decision. When considering many of our past actions, we must admit that the United States government apparently has earned indeed the status of the "bad guys" from the perspectives of some other peoples. So, what is to keep other societies from fearing American aggression? Is it our word that our government never attacks others unfairly, thereby leaving a mess of monumental proportions that will prove extremely difficult to clean? Somehow I doubt that is reassuring, especially in view of what happened to Iraq during the years immediately following September 11, 2001. Other nations do have reason to fear our government in irresponsible hands, and so do we.

In the early months of 2002, I heard a man in church loudly pray for George W. Bush because the president was, "willing to do the right thing even though people will die." It seemed that other parishioners were uncomfortable and shocked to hear this attitude so brazenly admitted in a church. It seemed that they were surprised that he not only used a religious setting to express his political views, he also implicitly asked an entire community to accept that more violence was a reasonable solution for violence. My guess was that everyone believed that it would be more appropriate to pray for peace in a church setting. Whether or not this man's words and prayers were appropriate, we also must reason

that, when an evil dictator or terrorist deserves to die, we should consider the guilt of all individuals who contributed to his rise to power (many of whom are American politicians whom United States constituents legitimately elected). Are not the contributors also responsible for the destruction this dictator or terrorist wrought? We must face the fact that all are hurt and all are guilty whenever inhumanity reigns. Any death that is ordained by anyone other than God (or, for non-believers, nature) is blatantly violent, sad, and, wrong. Violence, the intentional hurting of others, in any form and for any reason, is never acceptable.

Humans, as a collective, simultaneously believe in both the sanctity and expendability of others' lives. Some individuals may form their own opinions on good, evil, and life, but as a whole, we are a very perplexed species. We lack coherent definitions of "good" and "evil," and thus we never can be certain of the true moral nature of our actions. Our actions are never completely good, nor are they completely evil. I would like to refer to some wise insights contained in Catholic catechism, which maintains that sin requires the "full knowledge and deliberate consent" of the individual. I do not doubt that purely good actions require similar conditions. Full knowledge does not come except with transcendent cooperation with ultimate Truth. Human approximations of good and evil result from our collective and individual relationships with Truth, the asymptotically-impossible goal which we never will be capable of reaching. We simply do not have the intelligence, the comprehension, the maturity, the objectivity, or the power needed to touch so divine an entity. However, human ignorance and the infinite differences in our perceptions and relationships with reality are not proof that Truth is a myth (as many scholars and artists would have us believe). There is no reason to believe that we absolutely cannot find a way to come closer to Truth should we keep looking. As an educator, the purpose of my life is to do my part to

bring humanity closer to Truth. One part of cooperation with Truth is to admit that, sometimes, humanity is quite helpless because our knowledge and capability for understanding are so limited. One example, discussed above, is our inability to effect the past. Another example of our powerlessness is the fact that, while we can destroy the life of someone or something, we (sometimes thankfully) never have learned to eliminate its existence.

Evil exists as a part of the universe, and it is beyond our power to eliminate fully its presence. J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Silmarillion* (1977) addresses this issue in an interesting way. A great angel (Melkor) turns to evil by breaking with Illùvatar's (God's) melodies and singing what he believes to be his own notes. Yet, Illùvatar states that Melkor's dissonance is only a part of his vastness. Tolkien continued to offer the hypothesis that, aside from God, no one creates anything. God envisioned everything, absolutely everything, long before any seemingly different and rebellious idea came to the individual. Once envisioned, the something exists, and God always accommodates every harmony and dissonance we devise to his beautiful plans; we cannot undo his presence or his will. Professor Tolkien also worked with the reality of evil in the cosmos in *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-5). One can glean from this great story that, while fighting against dark forces is morally-imperative, evil always self-destructs, often in unexpected ways. How the evil in our world will self-destruct I do not know, but in the meantime, fighting against it might mean allowing our own Gollums to live even though we might think life would be safer, happier, prettier, more ordered without them. In *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West* (1995), Gregory Maguire considered the idea that "evil" is defined as what is remembered as such and/or what is never absolved. Humans therefore have choices as to what should be considered evil. Having such choices means we have a role in manipulating evil (and each other) by deciding who has committed it and what actions define it.

No matter how secure evil can be of its presence in the cosmos, humanity can be aware enough to consider some of the actions over which we have control to be "dastardly deeds." Does this not mean

that we can keep ourselves from committing at least some evil? At least each individual can do his or her best. All we can do is, as Alexandre Dumas, *père*, wrote in the illustrious story, *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844), “wait and hope.” Readers often mistake *The Count of Monte Cristo* for a revenge story, but it is really about the prideful human desire to become “God.” Edmond Dantès, wanting to exert his control over pain and happiness, actively tried to become “Providence.” Perhaps his motivation stemmed from a desire to defeat evil so as to be never again subject to misfortune. Trying to be God, Edmond goes about an elaborate scheme to reward good people and punish the wicked. However, Edmond does not feel satisfied in his lust for vengeance until he commits the ultimately “God-like” act of pardoning someone who had hurt him. One lesson in this aspect of the story is that the choice to “play God” or “Providence,” never will lead us to the status we seek and often claim. Still, there is nothing wrong with all humans, no matter their beliefs, trying to be “God-like” by doing their best to live according to a code of goodness and love. But, the individual must realize his limitations that compel him or her to stray from this code. Furthermore, no one has control over whether or not anyone else avoids committing evil deeds or succumbs to human limitations. We all continuously harm each other, we all contribute to evil deeds, making the concept of “innocence” a standard for which a minute number of us can qualify. Few of us would be worth sparing the torture Dostoevsky suggested when innocence is the sole condition for immunity. Many years ago, I heard a priest admonish the congregation about having to love and pray for everyone, including all those who hurt us. How does one love those who have hurt him or her?

I surely do not know the answer to this ancient and exasperating question. There are too many questions without accessible answers. We scarcely have begun to learn everything, though we have to try. And, should we learn something, then, maybe, we will create a fleck of good in our violent past and present.

What happens if we do not build that golden edifice of human destiny? Will the pain of imperfect existence prove unbearable? Disturbed by the possibility of feeling life's flaws, we continuously pursue an impossible goal (in spite of our inability to agree as to its true nature). So obsessed with avoiding our own pain, we ignore the question of how the beings we sacrifice feel about their roles in this fantastic quest. Also, we avoid any introspection that reveals to us how we fail as "innocents." Realization of our unique moral triumphs and failures might have given us some empathy for all guilty souls. Additionally, empathy might lead us to ask how any individual in this world can guarantee that he or she will never be chosen for that role. We might decide to stand together in acceptance of all aspects of human existence. We might resolve to face the wonder, happiness, loneliness, and agony of our lives courageously, all the while advancing through the struggle to draw finally closer to the sole real paradise that existence has to offer—Truth. It is only through Truth that life improvement, and consequently happiness, occurs.

Rather than experience empathy's discomfort, though, everyone regards everyone else with suspicion. This reality, too, can be illustrated by history. I am reminded of the class conflicts that have led to violence over the centuries. The powerful, having much to lose, guard their *puissance* with everything to which they have access without qualms about hurting others. And those without power have everything to lose, even their very dignity, at the hands of the powerful. The strange relationship into which we unite fear, greed, and irresponsible use of power, and the manipulative influence we allow this insidious alliance to have over us, are the reasons why we use every weapon we find against each other. Jean-Jacques Rousseau expressed in his *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* (1754) that one curse of humanity evolved from the moment when the first person enclosed a piece of land, decided that he owned it, and convinced others that he was speaking truthfully. I believe that this curse festered when that person decided to commit to guarding himself

(and his property) against everyone else via use of violence. Fear, greed, and power may be natural ideas and human urges, but choosing to commit to them, leading us to hate to the point of violence, was and is a frightful mistake.

As I mentioned above, ideas and natural drives, like neutrons, are by definition neither positive nor negative. There is no idea about which we should be forbidden to speak, as is expressed in the musical by Sherman Edwards and Peter Stone, *1776* (1969). However, there are some ideas, which clash with Truth, that lead to danger when not handled correctly. Those contrary-to-Truth ideas have become foci for much of human action countless times throughout human history. I read Kurt Vonnegut's *Cat's Cradle* (1963) as a freshman in high school. One idea that I garnered from that book is that human achievement is good, but twisting our success to hurt each other is an act of evil. I feel strongly that committing to and acting on an idea, then transforming the said idea (or achievement) into something harmful is not a part of "human nature." It is a blatant choice that is contrary to Truth. Humanity has chosen a course that drives us from Truth, leading to many of the evils in this world. It will be hard to change that.

I once spoke with a kind lady who lamented her perception that no one was friendly in her neighborhood. She asked me why I thought that this was the case. My response to her was that people in my generation were brought up to be apprehensive of others. After all, one of the first messages children receive from their parents is not to "talk to strangers." People have become more cautious than trusting, more closed than open. And the sad thing about it is that we all do have reason to distrust. It is better that children refuse to "talk to strangers" rather than take the chance that the person with whom they are interacting is not a pedophile. People in America carry guns because they are afraid, and people are afraid because Americans carry guns. In *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) Michael Moore appeared to suggest that, should we refuse to be afraid, we might be able to make our society less violent. How do humans refuse to be afraid? We stand together! There is no paradisiacal world on this Earth that

excludes or hurts any of us. Should we decline to sacrifice others so as to avoid the naturally cosmic pain we disproportionately fear, and work together to create legitimately the comfort we crave, we may find that the hold violence has over us will begin to diminish. A massive decision to modify our thinking is a tough mission to undertake. But different thinking is the root of change.

Although we do not know always how to define “life” in every context, most humans will admit that it has value exceeding all hang-ups about who among us is good, evil, innocent, guilty, victimized, or inhumane. The fortunate, however, typically do not want to understand that any comfort we claim has rested on an entire history of pain. However praised or criticized is Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), its pages offered at least one accurate realization: those benefitting from citizenship in an imperial power never wanted to face the fact that the prosperity that their nations enjoyed, an object of extreme social pride, was based upon “The horror, the horror.” That horror persists today. We still feel its effects, and though we pretend to be ignorant (and therefore exonerated of all wrongdoing) many of us are not. Our communication networks are now too advanced, our information systems too nuanced, for us to say we do not know or that no one knows the truth.

Listen for the voices, the sobs, every isolated cry, of the creatures we have sacrificed in pursuit of unnaturally perfecting a world that was, is, and can be most beautiful in spite of its flaws! Do you hear their screams? Whenever I sense their presence, I know that they ask me, “How could you?” This question is not an accusation or a condemnation, but an appeal for mercy and remembrance. In spite of the seductive magnetism of my personal comfort, my enjoyment of my merciless life is not good. It is not a legitimate vehicle to find my happiness. No destiny is worth succumbing to temptations to making hell for others, no matter how wondrously tantalizing the devilish reward may be.

Though I am confident that humanity is capable of much better thinking and activity than our history demonstrates, I have no foolish delusions that this essay somehow radically will change this world into the peaceful environment, for which many of us yearn, immediately. There is too much complexity to the problem of violence in the world to solve it with the small realizations from Dostoevsky's genius. Litanies of questions remain unanswered. For example: my grandparents, World War II veterans, might counter my arguments by introducing questions about what would have happened had they not taken every action that the Allies used to intervene against the Axis Powers and the rash hatred leading to the systematic murder of millions of people. Meanwhile, American outrage for the alleged plans of Denmark Vesey and the actions of Nat Turner to overthrow that peculiar institution that was racialized slavery, the evils of which today's world still feels, but largely ignores, supports ideas against sacrificing others for a better world, no matter the fight. When considering the vastly different cases of our reflexive reactions to world wars and slave rebellions, our beliefs about "innocence," and expendability are shown to be confused and subjective. Yes, obviously, the global scourge that is violence is too vastly complex and too entrenched in our societies and behaviors for immediate resolution. We are able to hope and pray for everyone involved, and for some eventual understanding, but individuals have diminutive capacity to affect natural human ability to hurt others.

The challenge to create a non-violent world is beyond daunting, but the overwhelming nature of a problem is never an excuse for failing to try to solve it. While making a change of the ideas that guide our actions is not a panacea for all the evil in the world, new thinking might prove a positive start. New thinking might help us teach future generations different ideas to underlie the cultures and societies they create, and thus alter the course they will take. And, with these incremental changes in thought,

future generations might turn from violence and sail closer to Truth. Humanity must live in the one universe we have; it would be best for all of us to turn from endangering any of its creatures, and to consider better the Truth it has to offer.